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Wisconsin One Year Later: What Happened, What is Happening, and What it Means for Progressives

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On February 11, 2011, even as masses in Tahrir Square celebrated Hosni Mubarak’s abdication of power in Egypt, Scott Walker declared war on public-sector unions in Wisconsin. With large margins in both chambers of the legislature and a legislative timeline shortened by tying the anti-labor legislation to a bill to repair a deficit in the current budget, which he and Republican allies had created via tax giveaways to corporations, the dramatic changes were to be enacted within a week. Labor and allies would barely have time to say no before the proposal became law.

Walker was right that he had the margins to pass the measure. But he had no idea the resistance that would be unleashed. Instead of quick passage against frozen enemies, the state witnessed weeks of occupation of the state Capitol, tens of thousands in the streets, unprecedented levels of labor solidarity and community concern. No one, no one, would have predicted in January that a move against public-sector workers would motivate more than a year of intense political activity, the likes of which the U.S. has rarely seen on domestic issues in the last thirty years. But it did.

This Social Policy Special Report provides background and a look at Wisconsin one year later. The fallout, both negative and positive for working people, has been significant. With their substantial majorities, Walker and his Republican allies have pursued an aggressive rightwing agenda for the state. Extending gun rights and anti-choice measures, reducing funding for Medicaid and unemployment insurance, opening loopholes and weakening consumer and environmental protections in the interest of corporations, and privatizing schools and government services, the Walker administration has pursued a standard and destructive course. (“Reviewing Walker’s First Year: An Agenda for the One Percent” offers more detailed information on the breadth of the attack on working people.) The structure of his anticollective- bargaining legislation eviscerated public-sector unions, leaving many locals unwilling to pursue even the required annual-certification elections on the terms now allowable. The agenda has extracted sacrifice from publicsector workers and the children, seniors, and low-wage workers who rely on state support and infrastructure. The entire agenda is self-reinforcing with complete corporate domination of the state and its politics as the end result.

Worse, Walker does it all in the name of jobs. He is right to think that jobs should be the priority. Wisconsin has 144,000 fewer jobs today than it did in December 2007 when the Great Recession began. More than 220,000 report that they are looking for work, thousands more toiling in part-time work looking for more hours, while still more have simply stopped looking for work at all. And Wisconsin’s extreme racial inequality has played out again in the recession, with one in three black workers either unemployed or looking for more hours of work.

In spite of Walker’s oft mentioned focus on jobs, and due in part to his austerity approach to the state budget, the Wisconsin economy has crawled along at well below the nation’s already anemic rate of job production over 2011. While the state added jobs over the first half year of Walker’s term, it actually lost jobs each month over the second half of the year, when the new Walker budget was in place. One year into the Walker regime, Wisconsin has just 3000 more jobs than it did at the beginning of 2011.

The right-wing, ALEC-fueled state agenda has made real and terrible progress in just one year. But in the good news for the state, and for progressives nationally, an equally real resistance has also been ignited. For most of the past year, the grassroots resistance has focused on an electoral strategy of recalls, first against Republican senators and now against Walker himself. (Wisconsin recall law requires one year of service before recall papers can circulate, so the Walker recall was on hold until now.) Summer 2011 recall elections reduced the three-vote Republican senate majority to just one. Currently, recall petitions against the governor, the lieutenant governor, and four more Republican senators are in the process of certification, with elections expected in the spring or early summer. (This also is covered in greater detail in this edition in “Wisconsin Act 10.”)

What Happened? Capitol Occupation, Closed Schools, and Hundreds of Thousands in the Streets, More than One Million Recall Signatures

In his first month in office, Walker and his Republican allies had stuck to a standard, and destructive, “job creation” script: tax breaks for corporations, shredding consumer rights, and undermining environmental protections. In February, the expected struggle blew up into war with Walker’s announcement of what amounted to an end to collective-bargaining rights for public-sector workers. By Valentine’s Day, the Monday after the bill was announced, thousands of students and workers were at the Capitol to protest the change, led by the UW Madison Teaching Assistants’ Association, the union representing graduate assistants on campus. By Tuesday, many more showed up to register their opposition at a public hearing on the bill. Students at Madison’s East High School walked out of class and marched some three miles to the Capitol to protest the bill. Testimony against the bill continued through the night, keeping the Capitol open. By Wednesday, so many teachers had called in sick that

public schools in Madison closed. They did not reopen until the following Tuesday. Disregarding notice requirements, the Assembly forced a vote on the bill on Thursday, and thousands rushed to the Capitol, beginning the round-the-clock occupation of the building that continued until early March. That day, to deny required quorum in the Senate, the state's fourteen Democratic senators left the state. Without their presence the bill could not be passed.

Each weekend, rallies grew larger. By March 12, more than a hundred thousand turned out to welcome the Democratic senators back to the state. The bill had passed: by taking out the "non-fiscal" collective bargaining items, the GOP worked around two-thirds quorum issue, and passed the bill. From that point, the bulk of the resistance turned to the electoral arena, starting with a Supreme-Court race April 5, followed by summer recalls of six GOP senators. The electoral action continues, culminating weeks ago in the submission of more than 1,000,000 signatures to recall the governor. That number is historic, representing nearly half the state's electorate and just less than twice the required threshold of 540,000 signatures for recall.

The occupation of the Capitol, the closing of the schools, the marching and drumming of students, the fundraisers and songs, the donations of pizza from all over the world to support protestors, the rank-and-file solidarity from private-sector unions, the hilarious and heartfelt signs and costumes at each event, the parade of tractors in support, the busloads of citizens showing up in the freezing cold to add their voices of dissent: the images are surprising, indelible, and inspiring.

But where it came from is less easy to explain. After all, for some thirty years, the right-wing pro-corporate agenda has encroached on almost every aspect of life. Rarely has there been much more than a rally. What can explain the reaction in Wisconsin?

There are some standard answers here, and those are certainly part of the story. The public-sector unions' quick concessions to the wage and benefit changes and focus on collective-bargaining rights painted Walker into a corner and generated enormous sympathy. Walker seemed like a bully, unwilling to compromise and reaching for too much. Beyond the public-sector unions, all of labor saw the crisis and united quickly for the fight. The quick solidarity displayed so movingly by exempted police and fire unions, but also by the entire labor movement was the product of long relationships between leaders and their rapid understanding that this was a line in the sand. Further, their united and coordinated leadership and messaging helped build a consistent compelling story to which thousands of ordinary Wisconsinites responded. Stages, microphones, marches, buses, press releases, and media contacts all were managed by the coordinated labor effort. Additionally, long relationships between labor and community leaders helped broaden the agenda and the turnout. As the struggle moved into March, the movement began to focus on broader regressive aspects of the Walker agenda and became more inclusive. A May Day rally in Milwaukee focusing on both immigrant and labor rights attracted a historic crowd of more than 100,000, a level of coordination and turnout that would have proven impossible if there were not a foundation of trust between labor and community leaders to build on. And finally, the united action of the Democratic senators leaving the state helped galvanize and focus the resistance as well. Local connections to the national progressive media and pundits also drove the storyline, making the fight in Madison symbolic of an ongoing struggle in numerous states, bringing star power to Madison stages, and heightening attention from across the nation and world.

But beyond these clear contributions and fueling them in many ways, was the outrage and leadership of ordinary rank-and-file union members, parents who love their kids' schools, and other everyday people. Their willingness to show up, to sleep in, to shout, and to sing, and to keep on doing so in spite of cold and snow and certain defeat provides the real fire behind the uprising in Madison.

Their rage was anchored in the widely held sense that Walker had demanded too much, but his approach was equally outrageous. That he tried to ram through such historic changes to Wisconsin labor law in less than a week, that he was unwilling to consider reasonable compromise, that he would take a call, a fake one in fact, from the conservative funder David Koch when he would not confer with Democratic senators, all of this was simply too imperial for many Wisconsinites. The history of good and clean government, tarnished in the last decade, was still strong enough that Wisconsinites felt his approach and policies were a betrayal.

The protests emerged also because there was no inside game to be pursued. There was no split about what should be done inside or outside. It was clear he had the votes to pass the bill. And only rage and activism could slow the process down. And no one really even could have predicted or planned for the ways that it did.

In a very real way, the people led this movement — the people in the streets of Madison, the occupiers of the capitol, and the brave groups that rallied across the state. And their united voices consistently called out the best in political and labor leaders in the fight. Their voices and outrage inspired Democrats to continue listening to testimony against the bill around the clock. Their numbers and voices inspired Democratic senators to leave the state. Their passion and vigilance inspired union leadership; at one early rally a pleased private-sector union leader said, "I had no idea my guys would show up. But they're here. And I'm ready to follow them."

What We Learned in Wisconsin and Need to Remember Everywhere

The last year in Wisconsin has been inspiring and depressing. Right-wing pro-corporate forces have made significant progress, but mass mobilization has shifted the dynamic. Wisconsin is emblematic of things to come, we hope not just in terms of the agenda that the rightwing will pursue, but also in terms of the resistance and mobilization of people against that agenda. Occupy Wall Street provides clear evidence that there is

real concern across this nation about increasing inequality and corporate domination of our lives, institutions, and democracy. In Wisconsin, we have learned some important lessons that can help us all as we shape the fight throughout this country. These lessons may not be particularly surprising, but they are the truths that all of us will have to hold onto and pursue in the coming years.

In Wisconsin, over the last year, we have learned that we can and should act boldly to defend our rights and values. Time and again, the real strength on our side was that we had the courage of our convictions and spoke from our hearts. We took our own side in the argument and finally went on the offensive. This was not only the way to inspire greater interest, but it is a lot more fun than letting someone else set the terms of the debate.

We also learned that unity of purpose is the key to our strength. We were able to assemble a broad coalition because it was clear what we are against – Walker’s agenda – and what we are for – fairness, a future, and the democracy needed to get them both. What we have in common is far greater than anything that might separate or divide us. We are in this together, and we finally decided to work together because that is true.

Wisconsin also proved that collective action is crucial to resistance and mobilization. Consistently, the mass actions helped change the terms of debate and threw opponents on the defensive. Collective action also inspired and activated new friends and called out the best in old ones. Working together, Wisconsinites changed political dynamics, to our advantage, and built our power. Our actions were and should be positive, peaceful, and confident. Our collective action also took on the forms needed. And in the future many forms of collective action will be required – electoral and nonelectoral, street theater, mass protests, rallies, and houseparties.

In Wisconsin, we learned that organizing, done strategically, is our real power. The vision that brings us unity translates into collective action only through organizing. And we saw that new platforms like social media and the internet can complement tried-and-true methods to educate, agitate, and mobilize our masses. And we learned that we have to organize ourselves for a long struggle, turning a moment into a movement. That too has begun to happen in Wisconsin. Last summer, the spring protests took an electoral turn, with successful replacement of two recalled Republican senators. This puts the Wisconsin Senate within one seat of a new Democratic majority. Putting the Senate over the top, and recalling Walker himself, is the focus of current efforts. Over the winter, in just a couple of months, in an impressive display of organizational strength involving far more people than money, a million signatures were gathered to depose the governor, with another million to remove his lieutenant governor and an additional three GOP senators. Whatever happens in that next round of elections, however, it is clear that labor-community-citizen alliances that came out of the events last year are here to stay. We Are Wisconsin and its many regional affiliates, We Are Milwaukee, We Are ... etc. are now real organizations, in some cases with real local reform programs as well as state. Along with electoral work, they are doing the hard work of political education and other organizing to build focus and solidarity among their thousands of active members. Walker’s assault on Wisconsin may indeed have changed its politics for the better, in ways he and his corporate backers did not anticipate.

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Photographs are by Anette B. Hansen, who has her BFA from UT Austin and her MFA from Madison. She lives in Madison with her husband, teenage daughter, and big black lab. She is motivated to document current events so people will not forget and do not ignore "the signs."